



“Atonement”: The Power of Perspective in the Evolution of a Narrative

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Abstract:

“Atonement” (2001) by Ian McEwan is an intimate novel about a thirteen-year-old girl, Briony, caught in the crossfire of innocence and coming of age. The book was adapted into an Oscar winning film in 2007 with the same title, directed by Joe Wright. The film

adaptation has shown the ability to translate source text to film as closely as possible.

In this paper, the author focuses on the power of perspective in text and film. The author talks about the minor differences in source text and final cut of the film. The importance of perspective in storytelling and the consequence of context in context with the novel, film and real life. This analysis would be interpreted through understanding of the source text and the visual devices used in the film.

The novel and the film involve varying perspectives on one particular event. This varying degree of subtext, context and consequence will be a major concern of my analysis of this adaptation.

Keywords: Perspective, trauma, Briony, guilt, Ian McEwan, Joe Wright.

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The journey of my research on the book *Atonement* and its film adaptation led me towards an analysis of enduring love, guilt and unimaginable trauma. But more importantly it shed light on the importance and value of perspective. The author, Ian McEwan, has managed to understand the intricate emotions of mankind in a manner that acknowledges the diversity that lies within our understanding of self. Through the various characters within the story, there is a nascent realization that there are multiple narratives working all at once; a facet in storytelling that is just as compelling as the characters itself. In this essay, I seek to understand the value of perspective in the development of plot through an analysis of memory and trauma that the characters have endured.

Atonement is in its essence an understanding of trauma and memory at various stages of the protagonist’s, Briony Tallis’, life. The film and the book for most parts have done justice in helping us

understand the various aspects of this emotion. Yet the exceptional aspect of the story lies in its ability to oscillate between the perspective of not just Briony but also her sister Cecelia Tallis and Robbie (Cecelia’s lover). The story that begins with young Briony orchestrating a play, *Trials of Arabella*, for the welcome of her brother Leon, during the course of which she chances upon the incident at the fountain between Cecelia and Robbie.

The understanding of the situation escapes her mind and the conclusion therefore made ends up largely damaging. *“Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935”* (McEwan, *Atonement* 41). *The distinction lies in the fact that more often than not there’s more than what meets the eye. The understanding of this particular incident that has been beautifully constructed in the film by director Joe Wright where one clearly sees the juxtaposition as to how Briony, Robbie and Cecelia have various understanding of the situation. Talking about memory and its manifestations as a result of trauma, Cathy Caruth explains: “The transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and other’s knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.”* (Caruth 153). *Expanding on this notion, Christa Schönfelder suggests that the memory that manifests from a place of trauma more often than not tries to understand the ‘incomprehensible’ yet such “a narrative tends to distort the “truth” of trauma and weaken its impact.”* (Schönfelder, *Theorizing Trauma Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds* 31). *The likelihood that the impact of the scene at the fountain between Cecelia and Robbie could be interpreted in multiple ways is often something that escapes the young mind of Briony. Tinged the scene with accuracy, McEwan exposes the falsity of her earlier claims.*

“While she initially imagines a marriage proposal, the details of the scene—with the potential “drowning” taking place after the supposed proposal, and the suitor standing awkwardly on the gravel while his new betrothed enters the water—quickly contradict this romantic narrative. Particular objects, such as the vase of flowers Briony notices, do not provoke automatic meaning, or even add meaningful clues to help her understand the scene” (D’Angelo 94).

The assumptions are later validated by the letter that Robbie writes to Cecelia as an apology, which was passed on to her through Briony who Robbie found on his way to Tallis household for Leon’s welcome party. The wrong draft of the letter seems to get in the hands of Briony who reads the explicit nature of the text not necessarily able to grasp and understand the nuance of speech and connects the fountain scene and the contents of the letter rather haphazardly. This shock is portrayed with the same shock experienced by the character in the film by juxtaposing a montage of the mistake made by Robbie with the wrong letter. The scene in the library where Briony finds her sister Cecelia in a compromising position with Robbie, she is found to completely misconstrue the situation. Neither Cecelia nor Robbie address the young girl and she is left to her own devices to make sense of what she witnessed. The visual imagery of this part of the story is particularly aesthetic owing to the fact that it captures the lustful nature. The same time that the Tallis family discovers the letter, their visiting twins run away. During the search their adolescent sister Lola is raped. The scene where Briony convinces Lola enough that it was Robbie who forced himself upon her calls for a rather classic understanding of the manner in which Briony has begun to create her own narrative on the basis of the incidents she witnessed through the day.

“For Caruth, trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event. And if memories of the trauma return, they are often nonverbal, and the victim may be unable to describe them with words” (Pederson, Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory 334).

The predicament that Lola finds herself is somewhat a classic example of what a traumatic situation such as rape implicate upon the comprehension of the situation. It is Briony’s confident accusation that consolidates Lola’s conviction on her perpetrator, even though she does not truly realize who it really was. “However close they were, it was not possible to read expressions. The dark disc of Lola’s face showed nothing at all, but Briony sensed she was only half listening, and this was confirmed when she cut in to repeat, ‘But you saw him. You actually saw him.’ ‘Of course, I did. Plain as day. It was him.’” (McEwan 167). An integral aspect that was left unexplored in the entire context of the film and the book was one of Lola. Through the course of the story, the fascination towards the character grows. Despite the fact that it has been revealed that the rapist that evening was Paul Marshall (Leon’s friend) and not Robbie during Briony’s confession during the final act of the books; Lola is found to marry Marshall. The argument regarding ‘traumatic amnesia’ argued by Bessel van der Kolk understanding the concept as being reliable and a reasonable response to trauma. There are various arguments to be made of that account, most of which I found absurd and unlikely to have reached such a conclusion. The idea that trauma could be blindsided in such a manner seems improbable. Richard McNally argues that the van der Kolk theory is theoretically and empirically despite evidence that imply the existence of such a thing as traumatic amnesia.

The suggestion of complete forgetting is found to be unfounded and baseless and the idea of ‘traumatic amnesia’ is a temporal aspect. This is further augmented by McNally when he suggests, “...one cannot conclude that a person who does not think about something for a long period of time—who has ‘forgotten’ it, in everyday parlance—is suffering from amnesia. Amnesia is an inability to recall information that has been encoded. We cannot assume that people have been unable to recall their abuse during the years when they did not think about it” (Pederson 337). The attention that is lacking to Lola’s character, though understandable from the plot

development perspective, seem to have been a lost opportunity on the part of McEwan and later in the film by Wright.

It is important for one to realize the fact that the relationship between Cecelia and Robbie is unexplored at this point and there is the definite fiery passion of adulthood that is vibrantly displayed through Cecelia and Robbie’s perspective as portrayed by McEwan and Wright in the book and the film respectively. The giddiness with which Robbie composes the first explicit draft and then the actual letter shows the inner tingling of a nascent romance that we find would never be truly realized as a result of Briony’s childish misgiving. Her statement is the decisive factor that sends Robbie to prison despite the fact that he is innocent. Geoffrey Hartman is of the idea that trauma and its consequent knowledge can be integrated into two aspects one of which is the traumatic event registered rather than experienced (Goarzin 1). This aspect could be one of the driving factors behind Briony’s response to the fountain incident.

Following Robbie’s arrest, the story traverses into various point of views. The engaging ones being that of Cecelia and her response to the injustices of the Tallis family on Robbie and her unfulfilled love. The story, having been set in the backdrop of World War II, one is able to understand and realize the pitiful state of Cecelia and thereby recognize her personal agony of lovelorn existence. Cecelia’s life is completely overturned by the sudden affliction of pain as what is seen as fleeting imaginations of a child. There is a sense of desolation and spite in Cecelia’s mannerisms which is a far cry from what Robbie feels. While the latter feels a form of dejection, helplessness and a sense of yearning for normalcy; the former is filled with angst and vengefulness towards Briony and her family as a whole. “They turned on you, all of them, even my father. When they wrecked your life, they wrecked mine” (McEwan 209). One sees that Cecelia has distanced herself from her family and the comfort of the Tallis household to fend for herself; thereby in her own way in exile from society and cheer. There is a sense of defiance in her stance against her own family for the treatment

meted out to Robbie. “Trauma simultaneously defies and demands our witness. It defies our witness in that it is never able to be fully known or understood; memory does not and cannot record the. Alongside this defiance, however, is a demand: the suffering that it cries out to be acknowledged and given voice” (Schick 1840). The remembrance and the processing of the images in the eyes of young Briony seems to be the only point of contention and devaluation of her credibility as a trustworthy narrator. Cecelia’s understanding of the situation leaves her yearning for Robbie as he is shipped off for the War. There is a sense of brooding in the story as the prospect of Robbie not returning from this journey seems a plausible reality.

The reticent loneliness is explored in the letters that Cecelia and Robbie share; as she has severed connection with her family and thereby her childhood, she is left all alone. The moment of true love taken away too soon, the impending War and its gloom adds to her melancholy. These aspects of Cecelia’s defiance are portrayed well in the film and she is found reminiscing about the times in the ‘quiet corner in the library’ (McEwan 204).

Few characters in literature have had circumstantial tragedy befall upon them as much as Robbie Turner. The fact that he was banished into imprisonment for a crime he did not commit, to having to face the scourge of World War II at Dunkirk; Robbie’s life has been overturned into a ruinous culmination. The background of the World War is discussed through the course of the second part of the book, especially the recklessness of war through one of the more catastrophic episodes of the War- the Dunkirk Retreat of May 1940. Instead of engaging with the glorious tale of the almost miraculous evacuation of 338,000 British and French soldiers on the beaches of Dunkirk, McEwan engages with the madness that ensued during the course of this incident. In Atonement, the Dunkirk retreat is primarily presented as a retreat, not an achievement, which will leave French civilians to fend for themselves in the face of the advancing German army. Robbie feels ‘the full ignominy’ of it. Thousands of soldiers are made to walk into a trap, a dead-end...” (Maurel). The idea of trauma in terms of the violence and

destruction of War is being explored through the eyes of Robbie, who not only faces the tragedy of separation from Cecelia but the travails of War. The expanse and internalized pain and desolation is aptly depicted by Joe Wright by portraying the violence, pain and wastefulness of the war. Robbie is shown as a vehicle of portraying the nature of the World War and the extent of destruction caused thereof.

The essence of survival is explored as Robbie finds an anchor in his love for Cecelia which is made evident through his correspondence with her during the course of the war. McEwan acknowledges using the “unpublished letters, journals and reminiscences of soldiers and nurses serving in 1940”. (Pyrhönen, Purloined Letters in Ian McEwan's "Atonement" 113). As we explore the relationship between Briony, Cecelia and Robbie are cultured through the story; we find that Briony has grown up and taken up nursing. She has settled into a life of lonesome mourning over her misgivings. (12). “The adult Briony is preoccupied with exploring why she persisted in blaming Robbie. The workings of her young mind are one mystery she wants to solve, not to mention probing how Robbie and Cecilia's minds worked under duress.” (Pyrhönen 108). The anger that Robbie feels when he sees Briony at Cecelia's place before deployment showcases the extent to which her lies had changed their lives. The climax of the film shows an aged Briony talking in an interview in 1999 and on the precipice of early dementia. Her life is remembered as a celebrated writer. A journey that started with Trials of Arabella for her brother Leon to what comes to be her last book as shown in the movie and the vaguely described in the book. The display of the crushing defeat that has overcome Briony Tallis' life is showcased in the film more poignantly. Just as one would like to propose the joyous reunion of the lovers as a form of “corrective fiction” (Finney, Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's "Atonement" 81-82), the fact that Briony could never truly brings these lives together comes to be the bleakness of fate and reality. While discussing Trezza Azzopardi's The Hiding Place, there is a similar implication of “...Confronting

us with a traumatized protagonist who is repeatedly revealed to be an unreliable narrator, the text encourages us to reflect critically on our attitudes and responses to trauma survivors.” (Schönfelder 312). The novel provides an area of trauma and its implications that implore us to understand the inner workings of guilt, shame and the inviolable anguish. Briony Tallis epitomizes the feature of atonement yet rather unfruitfully.

“The writing of Atonement, which vividly imagines a reunion of Cecilia with Robbie after his return from Dunkirk (where in fact he died), is the form that Briony's atonement takes. It is a fictional and imaginative attempt to do what she failed to do at the time- project herself into the feelings and thoughts of these others, to grant them an authentic existence outside her own life's experience” (Finney 81). The death of Robbie at Dunkirk from septicemia and Cecelia Tallis' death by the bomb that destroyed the Belham Underground Station; come to show that there is no true cessation to Briony's guilt. It is the onset of dementia and the eventuality of forgetfulness that is her only refuge as she has forever lived on with the shame. In the end, there is no true resolution and ambiguity pervades. “I would like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness...” (McEwan 372). The power of the narrative thereby lies in the hands of Briony who has rather conveniently absolved herself of the shame and inculcated her version of reality into the mindset of her readers. In a way one can realize her sense of guilt and the incurable nature of her traumatic past but never really coming to terms with it. The Marshalls (Paul and Lola) continue to love in the public eye having made legal provisions against exposal, Leon has comfortably reached old age and none too aware of the reality. The tragedy remains for Briony to carry on until dementia greets her into happy oblivion. The one thing that briony provides to Cecelia and Robbie is the pleasure fictional justice as she imagines them alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library and smiling at The Trials of Arabella.

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